HALF AN HOUR OF SILENCE
CHRISTOPHE VAN GERREWEY

Good architecture is unique – not so much because it is rare, but because it makes a space special. The occurrence of good architecture is based on a contrast with the context: something different is happening here, something unknown, something that wants to be understood but that, at the same time, resists immediate understanding, in such a broad and fundamental manner that everything soon gets involved. Thus, good architecture does not so much provoke an aesthetical or ethical experience as an existential one, precisely because that which envelops human beings continuously – space – is at stake.

It is clear that such an interpretation of the quality of architecture rests on an individual experience. Shared, useful or political meanings are not that significant – or at least not immediately. What is important is the fact that the singularity of a building, a space, a place, engenders in one individual the illusion of being on the trail of something outstanding. This does not mean that a spectacle is being performed – spectacular architecture enforces itself as an exception, while it is precisely the discovery that should be predominant. Rather than overruling the noise of the world with racket, good architecture silences all the rest for one moment by making an inner silence audible – as written by Le Corbusier at the end of his life in *Mise au point:* 'Thrown back on myself, I was reminded of the remarkable phrase in the Apocalypse: "A silence fell in heaven, of about half an hour."'[1] This silence can obtain meaning in different ways, depending on the architecture itself, but also on the listener.

1

A first form of singularity is pragmatic: good architecture opens the way for a possibility that did not exist before. It creates, in other words, the impression that life can always be lived differently than prescribed by the dominant customs. Architecture – it might as well be a design, a paper project or even a concept – turns the client (and each spectator) temporarily into a Houdini, who gets provided the means to detach himself from the straitjacket of the well-known conditions, laws and prescriptions. The context in which an exception is established is thus not the immediate environment, but the actual, automatised or even industrialised culture.

A house detaches itself from the norms of the *lifestyle*-press, from the allotment regulations, from the good taste of a district . . . an urban intervention makes the city lively, complex or even dangerous again . . . a museum is so boring, uniform and ordinary that it becomes almost invisible . . . a design asks attention for what we all too often do not wish or dare to face . . . a concept disentangles with remarkable

clarity a corroded knot of concerns, desires, layers and contradictions . . . a construction is erected and executed in a rare but exemplary fashion . . . or a building organises a programme so precisely that it seems to be at a new beginning. When something like this – literally – becomes reality, in a modest fashion the old avant-garde position of architecture remains intact: the imminent totalisation and uniformisation of culture – the rigidity of the habits and meanings with which human beings make sense of their lives – is counteracted in a very applied way. Or, as Jean Baudrillard said it in a conversation with Jean Nouvel: 'A work of art or architecture is a singularity, and all these singularities can create holes, interstices and voids in the metastatic fullness of culture.'[2]

2

The second kind of singularity that architecture can claim is technical in nature. Being prepared to be overtaken by one work of architecture is also the only way to do justice to the difficulty of *making* and *devising* architecture. It is, in other words, a paradoxical way of denying the existence of good architecture: there is no good architecture – there are only good buildings, designs, proposals, projects and operations. Good architecture does not become visible by means of recognisable features that refer to classic models, technical prescriptions or aesthetical preferences. Rather the opposite is true: good architecture manifests itself firstly, no matter how briefly, by overthrowing – or at least by questioning – every known set of references.

As soon as something allows itself to be reduced to a formula – and to a directive, a current or even an oeuvre – architecture threatens to become unambiguously cognisable, and both the needs of the human being that is 'served' by the architecture, the specific features of the brief and the site, and the meaningfulness and the necessity of the pursuits of the architect get lost. Good architecture is therefore not obliged to anything external to the project. Making architecture – and appreciating it – resides in time and again reformulating everything that is known, so that it is experienced again as new, in a paradoxical and relative manner. The opposite is unthinkable, as Adorno stressed it: 'Obligatory standards would nowadays only be prescribed and therefore not obligatory, even if they enforce obedience. Following these norms would mean nothing but docility and amount to a pastiche or a copy.'[3]

3

The way in which this approach is related to history – and to historiography – is a third illustration of its validity. Indeed, how is it possible to structure the history of architecture if it consists

or can consist only of incidents? How to discover patterns and connections between buildings if these can only be 'good' (and thus can be handed down to history rather than to oblivion) if they manifestly deny patterns or connections? The answer lies in a reversal of the question: doing justice to historical events is only possible if historiography is engrafted against generalisation by the vaccine of a critical loyalty to each singular work of architecture. Writing or imagining history is in this sense impossible without continuing to respect the complexity of one good building or one valuable design.

Manfredo Tafuri's historiographical project can serve as a consequent illustration, while the book that he (together with Luigi Salerno and Luigi Spezzaferro) devoted to the Via Giulia – on each building in one street in Rome – is the most concise example of this project. Also Geert Bekaert has constantly interwoven the singular architectural experience with his activities as a historian: speaking about architecture, no matter in which way, departs initially from the factual and secluded confrontation with a realisation or an architectural project: 'The novel of architectural history has to be written not to support or contradict some conception of architecture, but to narrate the veritable facts of architecture as concretely and as convincingly as possible.'[4]

4

Consequently, architecture can never be 'complete'. In other words: not everything can become architecture – let alone architecture of good quality. The peculiar work of architecture distinguishes itself from its surroundings and from the rest of the world, which might be designed (or not), but that in each case waits to be 'punctured' by one new, unique, good (or rather: better) form of architecture. The fourth, last, and probably deepest ground beneath the existence of this mechanism is its founding character: in an undifferentiated field, in an infinitely large chaos, one building suddenly establishes a centre, by means of an internal spatial articulation and organisation, that can be projected onto the wide environment. As such, soon the entire world is not only organised but also understood – no matter how shortly this conjuring and powerful insight spreads itself.

Of course, thanks to this aspect architecture tries to transfer old religious, sacred, holy, mystical, spiritual or cosmic claims to a disenchanted world. Differently put: modern panic – the obligation to oversee and apprehend the entire world in a few seconds – is turned inside out: the awareness of the infinity of the world and of its unknowability (certainly not yet a thing of the past) is faced from within the temporary bastion of good architecture. Mircea Eliade wrote a complete book on this, *The Sacred and the Profane*, which included this

sentence: 'In the homogeneous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no *orientation* can be established, the hierophany reveals an absolute fixed point, a centre.'[5] These are four possible ways in which good architecture can manifest itself. And *very good* architecture? That succeeds in making the cultural, technical, historical and sacred singularity audible all at once.

1
Le Corbusier, *Mise au point* (Paris: Force vivre, 1966), 22.

2
Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel, *The Singular Objects of Architecture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 21.

3
Theodor Adorno, *Ohne Leitbild: parva aesthetica* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 14.

4
Geert Bekaert, 'Architectuurgeschiedenis en -kritiek', in: Geert Bekaert, *Nergens blijven. Verzamelde opstellen Deel 6. 1991-1995* (Ghent: WZW, 2008), 354.

5
Mircea Eliade, *Das Heilige und das Profane* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1957), 17.

SOCIAL SPACE AND STRUCTURALISM[1]

HERMAN HERTZBERGER

Although the space for social exchange in buildings is constantly being marginalised and sacrificed for budgetary reasons, it is constantly discussed. You also constantly hear that 'social' media are making concrete social space redundant. Yet this disconcertingly expanding mania for contacts displays an endearing need for community. The impression that emerges is of a severely off-balance relationship between private life and social life. We can also see this virtual and therefore abstract world as a sign that there is something sufficiently wrong with the concrete world that is should alarm us as architects.

Greater attention to (the elaboration of) the communal (public) area within a building can transform this from a simple circulation space into a full-fledged place of abode experienced as communal. The idea is to create places where people can meet, randomly or with intent, and where activities of communal interest find a place. This does not merely require more space – the elements that have allocated roles and therefore serve a specified function, and in that sense behave as territory, must become penetrable and not turn away from the communal like fearful bastions; they must be as open to the communal as possible.

We should not underestimate the importance of spatial conditions for social structures. Social cohesion arises primarily